Guru Nanda Kumar says that the group has played with him in three volumes of the album *Jewels of Rhythm*. Almost every year, some of them also get to go abroad and play on stage with him. In fact, most of these youngsters have a jet-setting lifestyle. "We even rehearse in train compartments, much to the enjoyment of co-passengers," laughs Vivek, adding that their Hindustani counterparts are better off.

He isn't off the mark, for every tabla player worth his salt gets an

Islands in the melting pot
A Newsline series

RENUKA SURYANARAYAN

Giving up credit for the thunderous applause

An organiser's call is music to an accompanying artiste's ears. "Yes, I'll be there. I'm grateful that you've chosen me to perform. Who did you say is the main artiste? Yes. About the payment? Whatever you feel is right should be okay..." Trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, he knows he's being given a raw deal, something that's part and parcel of an accompanying artiste's life.

A mridangam player or a tabla player is the soul of every concert. So is the sarangi artiste who has now been replaced by the harmonium player as an accompanist. If the sarangi is dying an unnatural death as accompaniment, the harmonium wallows in an obscure unknown, unsung kind of existence. Actually there is a grading. A ghatam player is less important than a mridangam player, a morsing (a percussion instrument) subsequently comes lower down the rung. And you thought the age of the caste system was over!

"We all are in this for soulful satisfaction," says Vivek Rajagopal, a full-time percussionist. Except for a few, most mridangam players are highly qualified — post graduates, PhDs or computer software professionals — also devoted to other professions. Ask Shankar Lakshmanan, a ghatam artiste who works in an ad agency and he'll tell you that being a performing artiste has been cause for as much ecstasy as agony. "Sometimes we are even denied a mike on the stage," he guffaws, a broad grin hiding the pain. The ecstasy comes from the glorious time they have on stage when they all play with their teacher, Guru T S Nandakumar, easily Mumbai's most inspiring. In fact, they have all grown up together learning from him.

Percussion artistes jam together at guru T S Nandakumar's classes at Music Triangle; Vile Parle

Vijay Nambiar, an aspiring MBA; Sriram Subramanian, a CA; Prasad Rao, a graduate; Satish Krishnamurthy, full-time musician; Kumar Krishnamurthy, a professional; Vidya Balakrishnamurthy, a graduate; and Poornima Krishnamurthy, a student — they all draw their inspiration from Nanda Kumar, an inspiring percussionist. Institutions like Shanmukhananda, Music Triangle, Guru Kula Vidya Mandiram and Nadalaya give them an umbrella by organising his classes. A group of around 50 (with nine women and 18 Americans training to be percussionists) exclusive only to an accomplished percussionist.

"While no one denies we are talented, we're considered poor cousins of percussionists from Chennai," says Natesan. If a Chennai artiste gets a decent payment of Rs 5,000, those in Mumbai should consider themselves lucky if they get Rs 500. And then there's the darned ridin. Halls that have systems costing lakhs of rupees don't have the expertise to make them sound in sync with the main artiste.

Not that there aren't moments of happiness. Talking of the highs, Nayan Ghosh, whose Sangit Mahabharati, the school founded by his father Pandit Nikhil Ghosh, is a playground for all those who love the instrument. "It's like a family. They are all 'Guru Bhais', as they are called once they start learning under the same guru," says Pandit Ghosh, renowned sitar and tabla artiste.

Sanjay Borik, Ashish Ghosh (the last formal pupil of Pandit Nikhil Ghosh), Thomas de Castro (a percussionist from Bacul, who now plays the tabla), Raj Shroff from Dallas who is also into mod-